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THE FICTION OF EDEN PHILLPOTTS.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

IN old times before fiction was yet a quick-firing, self-feeding machine-gun, but was a single-barrelled piece which after being deliberately loaded, carefully sighted and skilfully aimed delivered its shot in the very diaphragm of the patiently expectant public, this or that novel might be honestly described as a literary event. Many novels are still so boasted in a variety of terms by the publishers' advertisements, which borrow the inspiration of prophecy and the language of analytic criticism to proclaim the event in anticipation of the fact. Many novels are thus proven even epoch-making events, though the epochs are so brief that the reader has no time to grow gray in them, but is hustled forward to a series of succeeding epochs by other events while still in the flush of his first youth. The effect with the maturer witness is so vertiginous that he hesitates to recognize for himself any recent fiction as an event, far less epoch-making, and one must let so admirable a story as Mr. Eden Phillpotts's last one come and go (the phrase bears me helpless beyond my meaning, for I hope "The Three Brothers" is not soon to go) without attempting to tag it with the familiar and once-valued label. But here I have a question of conscience, somewhat of the difficult and recondite sort which Mr. Phillpotts likes to deal with, or does deal with, whether he likes it or not; and my question is whether I had not better own, at the start, that all this author's books are as new to me as the newest, and are therefore for me, at least, epoch-making, if I prize them as I must say I do. It is open to me either to make this confession, and leave the reader to account for the fact as he may, or to conceal it, and take the chances of its escaping in the course of my proposed comment. I prefer to make the confession not only

because it is fairest to the reader who ought to know the man behind the criticism, but also because the truth is on the whole the only safe thing even for a critic.

Let us say, or let us suppose, then, that I have come to Mr. Phillpotts's books, for the first time almost simultaneously with the appearance of his last, and that the fault is as largely mine as the fault ever can be with a reviewer. Let us put aside the pretty problem, which I would like him to solve, of a nature feeling the peculiar charm, the feminine lure of uncandor, but turning in sheer alarm to the repulsive embrace of veracity as its sole refuge. Only a few weeks ago I read so good a short story of Mr. Phillpotts's that I decided to lose no more time in reading everything of his that I could lay hands on. I have since laid hands on nearly everything he has written, and if I have not read everything the blame is not wholly mine. Some of the things done in his process of finding himself and realizing his place in nature and art are not worth considering with the things done since. They need not be named, but may be grouped for censure and dismissal as sins committed while the author was still in the illusion that stories did not grow but were to be made out of romantic adventures and factitious persons. For any Anglo-Saxon author to outgrow this illusion amidst the praises of that criticism which so little represents Anglo-Saxon intelligence is very much; but several authors, of late years, have done it, and prospered on in the face of flattery. I do not think of any more conspicuous instance of survival into the life and light of reality than that of the very vigorous and penetrating imagination which has given us "The Three Brothers," "The Mother of the Man," "The Portreeve," "The Virgin in Judgment," "The Children of the Mist," "The Whirlwind," "The Secret Woman." These all have to do with nature and human nature as the author has known them in the region of Devonshire which he has made his own as Thomas Hardy has made Wessex his. There are other books of Mr. Phillpotts's which deal in the same air with the same sort of character, but with varying degrees of inferiority. They are not masterly, to say the least, and the ones I have named are masterly, though they are not equally masterpieces. I should like the reader to join me in judging him by them, for I believe that an author should be judged by his best. His less than best is, in a manner,

not done; or if this will not hold, then his less than best is not to be taken into account, unless in future work he recurs to the make of it.

In my acquaintance with the first of his masterpieces my opinion of our author came with an ease that ought to have made me suspicious, for nothing that comes easy is quite right. I said to myself, "He is a minor Thomas Hardy," and this though right was not quite right. He is a minor Thomas Hardy, but much more. He has a like joy in the face and heart of the earth, and he gets very close to the secret that remains hers, however we try to surprise it. But somehow the last mystical meaning of our great mother is withheld from him, that indicable charm which Hardy imparts to us almost as wordlessly as it was imparted him. Mr. Phillpotts gives us noble landscapes, honest, faithful, impressive, which he clearly does from loving to do them and which are as far as could be from what a simpler age than this used to prize as "word-painting." His stories abound in them; each book begins with one, and nearly every chapter, but they do not take the eye or hold the memory like those counterfeit presentments of people in which he excels. What of effort is evident in his work is the effort to relate his action to his scene, but his people would be as fully alive anywhere else as they are in Devonshire. He makes them so true that you have only to go to your own knowledge of yourself and of others for the proof of them. Nobody is quite like him in his skill of realizing them, but he is not the artist he is by any miracle. He has grown an artist from the clever artisan of his earlier books, which concern the things that happen to a man rather than the things which happen from him, and constitute his vitality. Even in his later books, which concern life, that is to say conduct, and not fortune, the novelist is still so far in his tradition as over-plentifully to supply his characters with adventure, and more things happen to them than happen from them, or than their conduct necessarily implies. When such things happen they form for me a serious break in the interest, but I am aware of a large prehistoric public which requires of a novelist that he shall keep things happening, whether or no, and I must not expect to have matters all my own way. While I am thus hinting faults, and hesitating dislikes, I will say that there seems rather more talk in the books than is needed

for the transaction of their business, or the revelation of character, or even the expression of opinion or emotion. Sometimes the over-much talk is Mr. Phillpotts's own, and that is worse; but at the same time I am bound to say that it is very good talk, and whether his or the others' is very natural and very distinctive; his persons talk in character, though they over-talk. At my time of life, also, I find over-much love-making hard to bear, though it may be very good love-making, as it nearly always is in Mr. Phillpotts's stories. Still, I acknowledge that the world abounds in younger readers who may not yet have had their fill of it, and who have their right to be appeased, to be glutted; a novelist cannot always be writing for readers over seventy.

The faults I have hinted prevail less in the masterpieces mentioned than in such prentice work as "The Dagger Farm," "The American Prisoner," "The Sons of the Morning," "The Good Red Earth." I leave out of the account altogether such jobs as "The Golden Fetich" and "Doubloons." When a novel is well imagined in truth and righteousness things are apt to be better in it of themselves than could have been forecast; they work together for excellence, and relieve the author of much labor. His toil lies in the stories which he makes up because he thinks stories can be made up out of adventures, or traditions, and may hide their inherent weakness in strange lands or other days. Mr. Phillpotts has served his time to this error, but for the most part he is now actual and immediate.

One picturesque region in Devonshire is always his scene, and its inhabitants, of slightly varying levels, afford full sweep for the play of his imagination. It is as if Mr. Thomas Hardy had found Egdon Heath the satisfying scene of all his actions; but Dartmoor is a larger theatre apparently, and more densely peopled with men and women not quite so simple as Mr. Hardy's, but of natures as primitive and passions as wayward and wilful. We miss the play of Hardy's humorous sense of his folk, though now and then Mr. Phillpotts lets us see how quaintly droll some of his own can be. I tremble at this point to say that he seems often to go deeper in motive than his predecessor, and that he betters his instruction in finding nobler types of women. I hate to own that any one can be better than Mr. Hardy in the same air, and besides I doubt if anything is to be accomplished by this

sort of comparison. But to keep to the safe positive ground, we may recognize that he penetrates recesses of the heart not hitherto explored, and deals with fresh surface facts of life in a way he seems to have found out for himself. He seems to take a hint from the openness of his people, and to show them as often as they are so, unbelievers, agnostics, doubters, deniers, very atheists. They are less cruelly bound in the gyves of conscience than George Eliot's folks, of whom they remind you almost as much as of Mr. Hardy's; they are allowed more joy in "the freedom of the broken law"; but their destiny, if not their conduct, is held in as strict allegiance to the law. Their manners and customs are frankly and inlaboriously noted; we are harassed with as little dialect as need be; and are made to see how the thought of the age has penetrated Dartmouth as effectively as London, without more changing character. The same enmities and amities are at work, and science as boldly questions religion among the rustics whose outward lives still conform to ancient tradition. Mr. Phillpotts's more violent people have frequent occasion to curse and to swear, and then he lets them take the name of God in vain without the employment of the typographical devices in which printed profanity used to soften itself. The irreligious do not go either to church or to chapel; the infidels fearlessly question the existence of God and the goodness of God, and deny the benevolence of nature. There is apparently a great deal of pessimism in Dartmouth, but this does not prevent the observer of its life from divining a heart of sweetness in it as diffused but as positive as the honey of its furze and heather. The farm and its interests are strongly realized, but we are made to see how the insidious and incessant spirit of change has pierced to the core of things there as elsewhere. The paganism which we are sometimes aware of in Mr. Hardy's rustics is sensible in Mr. Phillpotts's, but the atheism of his moor men is as far from polytheism as from monotheism; they have scarcely more superstition than religion.

It is their passions, their propensities, their wills, their natures which remain primitive, and often as volcanic as the fires which fused the rock of their pasture in perdurable granite. Whether they believe or disbelieve, whether they deny God throughout the universe, or know Him in every thought and motion of their being, these things in them continue the same, characterized of

course by conditions, and somewhat shaped by circumstances, but essentially of the pristine quality. It is perhaps because the elemental forces have freest play in "The Whirlwind" that I am, in spite of a final doubt of its right to such primacy, inclined to put it first among Mr. Phillpotts's books. It has not the range and the tolerant wisdom of "The Three Brothers," and it has not the spiritual beauty and the affectional force recognized in "The Mother of the Man," but for solid and massive tragedy it stands alone among the author's books. The traits and incidents which play about the central motive and follow to the supreme event are as graffites on the surface of that monolith. In the *aer cieco* their fate is so terrible, the woman's treason is so strange and the man's revenge so resolute that an inevitable doubt tempers the effect. If it is possible that a woman should still love her husband while she yields rather in compassion than in passion to another's love of her, the case is too abhorrent for acceptance, though the skill of the author is such that while you deny it in fiction you feel that it may have happened in life. It is all of the mystic quality of Anna Karenina's dream, in which her husband and her lover are reconciled in their common possession. It is as far outside of moral question as that is, and the author does well in leaving it to the doom that overtakes it when, the paramour being already dead, the wife saves her husband from murder by killing herself. This also saves the author much trouble, and spoils the critic's case against him. But the question remains whether such a woman as we are shown would have been such a woman as she becomes; though there is no doubt that her husband would have become such a man as he does. His part is indeed simpler: as a rigid fanatic with no allegiance to anything but the God momentarily revealed to him in his innate faith and constant worship. Of course it is the God of his own making, a God of truth and purity and justice, but without the mercy which comes to the creature in the supreme moment from his own human nature. The thing is masterfully well done. For the time you are compelled to believe that the compassionate woman's mind has been corrupted and her intelligence darkened without taint to her soul; but afterwards you find this more than ought to have been asked of you.

Perhaps the author does not quite ask it; perhaps he recog-

nizes a tragedy beyond the explicit or implicit tragedy. After all, nothing is so mystical as every-day life, that is to say, conduct; and such greatness as this author convinces us he has lies in his sense of the mystical quality of conduct, of every-day life. He evinces this in those other great novels of his: in "The Children of the Mist," in "The Portreeve," in "The Mother of the Man," in "The Virgin in Judgment," in "The Secret Woman," in "The Three Brothers." I do not know that the last named, which is the last written, is an advance upon the rest in power, but perhaps it is in art, for either I feel in it, or I imagine in it, the repose which is the ultimate expression of art. I ought not to disadvantage the others by comparisons which may not hold under careful scrutiny, but to the casual glance may seem just. I prefer to look at each book in the positive way, and to praise the last as a faithful and convincing portrait of three natures, allied in their difference and changing places not only through the accidents of experience, but by the emergence of forces inherent in each. The most interesting is that of the falsely benevolent brother whose perpetual will to be helpful and kind brings ruin on himself and his beneficiaries. The pessimistic brother, who takes up his failure and repairs it, is a triumph of characterization in which the author keeps himself from sentimental excess by good fortune little short of miraculous. He does not quite ask too much of us, but he almost does so; and he does not help himself out by tragical chance as in "The Portreeve," where the ruling passion, the inverted love which has become hate, fulfils itself blindly and involuntarily. "The Mother of the Man," in which the maternal instinct rises to inspiration, and "The Virgin in Judgment" in which the celibate instinct works horror and despair are not so surpassingly good art as "The Secret Woman," or "The Children of the Mist," the heart of whose mystery is harder to pluck out. Not that I fancy myself plucking out the heart of any of those mysteries in having so barely stated its dynamic motive. The mystery of art as of life is in the static things; to these we go back and rest and refresh ourselves in them after the moving forces have swept us helpless to the end. It is in the abundance of these static things that the lasting charm of this new great novelist exists. I do not claim him the cause or effect of anything epochal. He arrived in his order, not because George

Eliot and Thomas Hardy were before him, but because the revelation of the moral government of the universe perpetually demands prophecy, and when one voice is exhausted finds another. There are notes and inflections and tones in the later voice that remind us of the earlier; but that does not matter; what really matters is that it utters the truth in the forms which, whether we have ever known them in life or not, we know to be real.

W. D. HOWELLS.